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Lyman, Albert Josiah

The miraculous element in the Egyptian plagues

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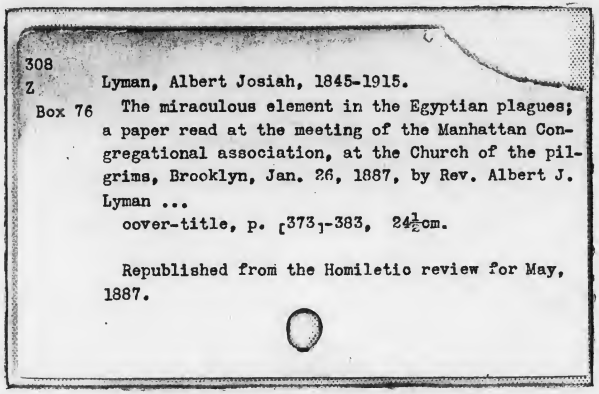

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THE MIRACULOUS ELEMENT IN THE EGYPTIAN PLAGUES.

A PAPER

Read at the Meeting of the Manhattan Congregational Association, at the Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, Jan. 26, 1887.

BY REV. ALBERT J. LYMAN,
PASTOR OF THE SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, BROOKLYN.

Republished from THE HOMILETIC REVIEW for May, 1887.

12 April, 1920

I.—THE MIRACULOUS ELEMENT IN THE EGYPTIAN PLAGUES.

By Rev. A. J. Lyman, Brooklyn, N. Y.

The popular interest aroused by Mr. Henry Drummond's recent volume "Natural Law in the Spiritual World," illustrates the strength of the instinctive human demand that some sort of real harmony should be made out between the world of Nature and the world above Nature. And the question that arises in regard to Mr. Drummond's suggestive and brilliant argument, whether, after all, that argument does not itself involve a subtle and latent materialism—a suspicion which there seems to be some ground for affirming—this question, we say, puts us still more upon the guarded search for the real truth behind Mr. Drummond's theory. And if we must still put the old name of Bishop Butler above that of Drummond, and still assert that Butler's word "*analogy*" is a truer word than Drummond's word "*identity*, by which to designate the relation between the laws of the natural and those of the supernatural realms, we must yet also obey the further demand of our age, and seek to show that this analogy includes the notions of vital co-operation and harmony.

The present paper may be perhaps regarded as in the nature of an exegesis upon the 23d verse of the tenth chapter of Exodus, which reads as follows: "All the children of Israel had light in their dwellings." We single out this passage, partly on account of the beauty and splendor of the miraculous incident it so tersely describes, but especially because this ninth of the ten Miracles of Egypt—the wonderful daylight in the dwellings of Goshen—while all the land was as if drowned in an horror of darkness, is the natural culmination of the chain of events, which we propose to examine.

This chain of events, we shall contend, is distinctly miraculous, but miraculous, not as against natural order and law but rather in har-

mony with natural order and law. What was evident in Egypt is not in subversion or suspension of Natural forces, but rather a supernatural sublimation of those very forces. The drift and purpose of our argument is therefore apologetic, not rationalistic. It is not to destroy or dilute the faith, but to defend the faith.

I.

WHAT THEN IS A MIRACLE?

As everybody knows, the question of miracles is an ancient and still thickly-trodden battle-field, and no doubt here upon this field we discover the exact line where the sharp knife-edge of scientific observation and assumption meets the unyielding claim of Scriptural testimony and Christian faith. We say scientific *assumption*, for something of assumption certainly often intrudes into scientific conclusions. Neither assumption nor presumption are confined to the theologians. There is an invisible gnome in the laboratory of our scientific friends, who manages to slip in to the midst of their careful deductions, a quite incalculable amount of *guessing*. This little supra-scientific wizard we may name by various names. In happy cases we may call him imagination or intuition, or inspiration; in unhappy cases, we must give to him the name of Prejudice, Bias, Fantasy, but in either instance whether he suggests a truth or induces error, he is non-scientific; he is outside of the retort, not in it; he hovers above the crucible and behind the lens, and adds his potent magic drop, unseen, to the scientific residuum, and does it so deftly and so infallibly, that despite the protests of our scientific brethren, we must really often insist upon our word, "assumption" in defining their methods and determining the intellectual value of their conclusions.

Calling attention then in passing to this slight alloy in the aforesaid scientific blade, there is no doubt that where it strikes and cuts upon us, is at the point of alleged miraculous historic events.

But the force of its stroke is mainly due to our own lack of skill. It is due to two things; first to the fact that we have foolisly abandoned a Theistic ground as the basis of argument about miracles; and secondly to the fact that we have defined miracle itself so abominably.

The question of miracles for us as Theists is not, as we often put it, how to reconcile miracles with Natural Law, for God is ruled out of an issue so stated at the start, and we are at the mercy of our adversaries. Stating the question in this way is half or wholly to abandon the theistic ground, and hand our shield to our enemy. The real question is, and we should insist on putting it so, how to reconcile *God in miracle with God in nature.*

A man wastes his breath in reasoning about miracles with an Atheist or an Agnostic. Some real and valid Theism must be admitted on both sides, before the issue of miracles can even be set up on a fair intellectual field. Nor is it just to say in reply on the other side,

that such an admitted Theism begs the question of miracles on the side of faith. Not at all, for certainly we can conceive of a God as acting so invariably according to what we call Laws of Nature as that no exception shall ever occur.

This, then, is the real question. Can a God, who works in the occasional outburst of miracle, be identified as the *same God as He who at the same instant and in the same place*, is also working according to the invariable power and sequence of Natural Law? This is the real question, and it rules out at once that antique (would that we could say obsolete) definition of a miracle, which seems formed expressly for easy manipulation by our scientific opponents; viz.: that a miracle is "an event contrary to or in suspension of the laws of Nature." That definition is about the worst boomerang that ever became mixed up with the true weapons of faith. It hurts nobody except the person who throws it. Because, if God be in Nature in any strong and steady way, as we insist that He is, why, then, it is not *Nature* that is "suspended," contravened and set aside when a miracle occurs, according to this definition, but it is *God in Nature* that is so contravened and set aside, and this is a very serious thing to say, for how can God set aside God? And the more honor we put upon God as actually living in His own world, immanent and operative, the sharper becomes the back stroke of the boomerang, when we define a miracle as calling for a stoppage of that invariable and immanent energy.

Is there not then some different notion of a miracle which may be defended and justified—a notion which will include all the facts both of Nature and Revelation, and so be in the line of a broader and more vital Theism? May there not be a conception of a miracle according to which the God in Nature whom science celebrates and the God above Nature whom Christians adore, may be shown to be one God, unified in a coincident and co-operative energy, *at once* natural and supernatural?

It has seemed to us that a careful study of a single great series of miracles, will tend to throw light upon this question, and perhaps we shall be led toward the surmise if not the conviction, that so far from involving a suspension of the ordinary laws of Nature, a real miracle calls for the most vigorous action of those very laws, and then adds to them so acting a certain higher and supernatural quality or energy, often modifying or even transforming the results obtained, yet never so as to suspend the operation of the natural law; so that a miracle always honors God in Nature *and also* testifies to a God above Nature. In other words, it seems admissible to suppose that a miracle discloses the intensest degree of natural energy, *plus* something more which is supernatural and divine, that both nature and the supernatural cowork and coalesce in a genuine miracle, and that here precisely is the

noble and infallible test of a genuine miracle, and the distinction between a real and a spurious or pretended miracle.

In the pretended miracle Nature *is* ignored, its presence disavowed, its powers contravened, its proprieties violated, its reasonableness set at naught; whereas, in the real miracle, the case and situation plainly disclose natural law and force, not only present, but active and acting at their highest pitch of open energy, neither hidden, suppressed nor suspended, but *supplemented* at the very acme of their free and unhindered might, by the different and still mightier push and pressure of a supernatural Hand. The result in an extreme case might be a transformation, but never a real reversal of natural law.

II.

We propose then to illustrate this hypothesis by recalling briefly the grand and familiar story and scenery of the Egyptian Miracles.

The purport of the argument will not be misunderstood. It is not at all to diminish the evidence of the supernatural; it is to establish that evidence free from cavil; it is to show that, while nature and miracle are two, the God of Nature and the God of Miracle is one, and that He uses nature so far as it will go on the way up toward His miraculous acts. It is not to lessen by a fraction the sense of that solemn and splendid and divine majesty by which God, Jehovah Himself, delivered Israel by His stretched-out arm, but it is to show, if we may use the metaphor, that He did it with *both* arms—the one arm of natural forces and laws, the other arm of supernatural—we will not say *intervention*, but the nobler word *supervention*.

The Miracles of Egypt were a series of Ten Plagues, which descended upon the land in connection with that wonderful method of divine surgery by which a nation of slaves were to be cut out from a nation of slave-holders, separated not only physically, but mentally and morally, and made a nation of freemen.

To accomplish this—to disengage and develop so many thousand bondmen, ignorant, superstitious and timid, without organization or discipline—was a task of superhuman difficulty and demanded superhuman measures, and here, let us say, although it is a very trite thing to say, that in this fact of the exceptional greatness of the end to be secured is the first beam of light on the subject. A real miracle always possesses and usually discloses an end sufficient to justify it. A part of the reason of the case is that in the instance of a genuine miracle, there must exist an imperative necessity that something should be done for which ordinary natural means are insufficient.

Now here it seemed to be necessary to withdraw and isolate one nation among the corrupt nations of the earth in order to educate the sense of righteousness and the knowledge and fear of God. Complete isolation was necessary. The moral salvation of the world demanded it.

It was necessary also that this withdrawal should be effected and

accompanied by the most imposing signs and wonders, in order properly to affect the dull minds of the people chosen. The epoch of separation from the idolatrous world must be burned into every individual memory.

Here, then, was a warrant, a justification, a necessity for the employment of the most extraordinary measures. The end to be secured matched with the miracle, which was to secure it.

This, of course, is a very old and familiar point in the discussion of the subject, but it seemed best to touch upon it in passing, lest whoever reads this paper might suppose that some new fangled theory of miracles was broached in it, discarding all the sound and established doctrine on the subject. No approximation to such a folly is intended. We wish simply to direct attention to what is certainly a series of the most extraordinary coincidences between the order of natural law and the order of the Egyptian miracles, and thus ask whether these coincidences do not point to a broader and more truly and deeply Theistic statement of the doctrine of miracles, than the statement popularly received.

III.

Now turning directly to the Ten Plagues, we find that the entire ten fall naturally into three groups or classes. The first group comprises the first six of the plagues. The second group comprises three plagues, the seventh, eighth and ninth, the third group or class includes only one plague, the last and greatest of the ten.

Now confining our attention to the first group, the first six plagues, we find five of them, viz.: the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth naturally and necessarily dependent upon the first.

The first plague was that of the turning water into "blood."

Then followed in their order the second plague—that of the frogs, third the lice, fourth the flies, fifth the murrain upon the cattle, sixth the boils upon the human body. Three pests and then two pestilences.

Now if you wished by natural means and under natural law to produce three pests and two pestilences; if you wished that these three pests should be in the form of an inroad of vermin and foul creatures and that the two following pestilences should descend one upon beasts and cattle, and the other upon men, what would be your device to produce this result? There is but one possible method which would produce the double result of the pest and the pestilence, and that is to touch the water of the land, to render the water of the land impure. To deteriorate the water and fill it with decaying organic material, would be the one sure way to produce in the first place vermin, the spawn of corruption, and after that pestilence, and this pestilence might, as with us, take the form of fever, or, under other conditions, would take the form, as in Egypt, of cutaneous and suppurative disease.

While we do not question, then, that in the coming and course of these

great curses, there is distinct and emphatic evidence of supernatural and miraculous energy, we cannot but notice, also, how *law-abiding* is the miraculous energy. Once the force in operation, it follows exactly the channels and sequences of natural law.

In Egypt, not only is the water the life, but of the water there is only one source of supply—the river Nile. Disturbance far in the interior, even in the mountains of Abyssinia, would fill every sluiceway, every pond, every canal in Egypt with the precise equivalent of that disturbance. What natural means may have been called in to aid the supernatural power in order to produce that first reddening, thickening, poisoning of the water, which in the narrative is called "blood," we do not know, but the proof is clear that the supernatural energy, which we do not question, availed itself, in its very initial stroke, of precisely that agent and channel, by which all Egypt could be reached in the most telling and simultaneous way.

To this extent, then, even in the first burst of the miraculous power, natural propriety was complied with. In the first movement of that divine dealing, by which a nation was to be excised and educated, natural conditions were not antagonized, but utilized, and made the most of. We not only admit, but maintain, a miraculous element and energy at every step of the process. We believe that the great engine of retribution about to roll over Egypt was set in motion and pushed forward by the Divine hand; but we see, that even in that first stir of the great drama, ordinary law and condition were used just so far as possible.

Now, let us observe carefully what followed. Seven days elapsed —the only indicated instance of any long lapse of time between the successive plagues. The ensanguined poisoned waters brought death, to the fish. The fish died, the river became turbid, rank, laden with decaying organic material. What would be the result? Evidently, the creation, *not instantly*, but within the few days of interval specified, of immense swarms of those foul or small organisms which carrion and putrid waters always breed. The frogs, the lice, the flies, are not arbitrary selections; they are simply the successive battalions in that loathsome army whose coming was natural as well as supernatural. Miraculous energy was added; we do not question that. It intensified the process; but it also went along with the natural law. If the order had been reversed—if, for example, the flies had bred and brought forth the rotting fish, and the fish had produced the bloody water, the difficulty would have been much greater. This would have been an inversion, a contradiction of nature, and would have constituted a good miracle for the Apocrypha or mediæval legend, but the actual fact, viz: that the fishy corruption bred and brought forth the flies, was precisely the supernatural pushing forward of the natural process applicable to the case.

Then what followed the pests? Pestilence, just as it should. Murrain upon the cattle, boils and blains upon the men—the exact thing to be expected. These plagues were the reverberation of the first plague, according to the way in which such thunder ordinarily rolls through the world of natural law.

These six are what may be called the first chapter in this dispensation of retribution.

IV.

But the same singular correspondence between the miraculous energy and natural law, is even more striking when we turn to the second group of the Egyptian Plagues, the group of three, the seventh, eighth and ninth.

We have already referred to the water of the Nile as the one universal factor, to touch which was to touch all Egypt at once. There was still one other such factor, and that was the atmosphere itself. Storms are rare in Egypt. Violent and general disturbance of atmospheric equilibrium is almost unknown. All the more, then, would such a disturbance be startling and fatal if it should take place. It did take place. And this, we admit and contend, was God's miraculous work, who "hath his way in the whirlwind." But now observe again how strangely the supernatural energy, once loosened, conformed its method and results to what the natural law of such disturbance would demand.

The seventh plague, then, was that of the storm and hail. This storm was of unparalleled violence. The miraculous energy intensified the natural forces. It did not suspend them.

Now what would follow? Plainly, such a storm would naturally produce great and somewhat prolonged agitation in the atmosphere. Violent and shifting currents of wind would be excited; sharp contrasts and changes of temperature would occur. That ordinarily equable ocean of mellow air which spreads its cloudless depths above the land of Egypt, would be by this storm broken up into tumultuous and warring waves. Now what are the two following plagues—the eighth and ninth? Are they not plagues brought about by just such violent waves of air, namely: *by two great winds*—one from the east, the other from the west? After the storm of hail and breaking up of tranquility, first came the strong east wind, bringing the eighth plague, the locusts, from the vicinity of the Red Sea. This is expressly asserted. We read: "The Lord brought an East wind upon the land, all that day and all that night, and when it was morning the East wind brought the locusts." Surely, no antagonism of nature is indicated here! And how were the locusts gotten rid of? God did not send angels to pick them up in baskets, as an Oriental or mediæval fancy in regard to miracles might assert! The true miracle exhibits nothing of this fanciful or fantastic quality. Everything is appropriate and dignified. No little dexterities are paraded. No gymnastic

display of superhuman powers. A miracle includes the special, powerful pushing up of natural agencies, and of other agencies together with and beyond them, which are not unnatural, but supernatural.

So the locusts were not picked up, nor did they hear the command of the Lord, and march back of their own free will, but there came a wind to carry them back. What wind? Precisely the wind which, according to the law of winds, might follow, namely: the reaction from that east wind, or, in other words, a wind from the *west*—the second great rock of the air after the thunderstorm—and it drove the locusts back to their hot home by the Red Sea. It is said: "The Lord turned a mighty strong West wind, which took away the locusts and cast them into the Red Sea."

But what else did that west wind bring? Did it not bring the ninth plague, that of the darkness? What does the west wind bring in Egypt now? Ride out from Cairo, west of the pyramids, and see! Beyond those pyramids stretch westward two thousand miles of sand, and sand in Egypt is the most pitiless and terrible ally of the wind. It hisses like an adder as it runs before the blast. It rises, wreathing itself into tall columns, shutting out the sun. Not only the larger particles are swept along like fine hail, but the finer particles also are disengaged and whirled aloft, an impalpable dust, which penetrates one's garments, and which the handkerchief at the face cannot entirely shut out from the nostrils. This fills the air. One cannot see the separate particles, but the whole air becomes thick and murky. The sun grows scarlet, then livid, then dull like blood, and finally is buried at midday without a cloud. Twilight overspreads the landscape. A slight specimen of such a storm I myself experienced on the Nile. For two days the palm trees on the bank of the river, two hundred yards distant, were blotted out. Dreary and ghastly beyond expression was that cloudless gloom at midday.* Intensify such a wind, and the result of it would be actual darkness. Literally, it would be a "darkness that might be *felt*." And was it not precisely this "darkness that might be felt" that became the ninth plague? It lasted, we are informed, three days, just as it would be likely to do. Certainly, it is not expressly stated in the narrative that the darkness was due to the fierce western wind, that swept back the locusts, but a wind strong enough to carry back bodily an army of locusts would be certain to raise the whole shifting coverlet of the Sahara, and bring it in its grey and deathly horror over all the land.

All? Yes, all *except Goshen!* "The children of Israel had light in their dwellings." Now, where was Goshen? Just where it ought to be in order that the sand cloud should not reach it. "The children of Israel had light in their dwellings." Not by a fantastic favoritism of

* I may, perhaps, say here that it was in connection with some months spent in Egypt and upon the Nile that the force of the present argument seemed to develop itself in my own mind.

some demigod, but by the miraculous intensification of a natural law; was this exclusion secured. The land of Goshen occupied the extreme northeastern rim of Egypt. It was a strip of land running along the eastern border of the Delta possibly pushing a slender tongue south to within a few miles of old Memphis, near the modern Cairo at the apex of the Delta. Goshen then in its main part lying far east, would be comparatively free from the darkness of that western whirlwind. "All the children of Israel had light in their dwelling."

The marks of natural correspondence, in all this miraculous story, culminate here. That daylight in the slave cabins of Goshen shines back upon the whole course of this miraculous story. We would not of course maintain, that every literal detail of correspondence can, in the rapid and picturesque narrative of the Book of Exodus, be made out. But enough has been noted to show that certain broad lines and masses of correspondence can be made out, similar to those which Mr Gladstone cites in his late articles upon "Genesis and Geology" in reply to Mr. Huxley. They are at any rate sufficient to meet and silence in reference to the Egyptian Miracles the cavil that objects to miracles as dishonoring nature and the God of nature. On the contrary the true miracles of God stand in the double dignity and majesty of nature intensified and a supernatural added. The last plague of the ten stands alone, as it should; it is more inscrutable than the rest, and ought to be, just as death, its instrument, is more inscrutable.

V.

For in this course and line of argument, we have not the smallest intention of attempting either to explain miracles or explain them away, but simply to secure a better, more natural and more Theistic statement of them.

Our argument, then, does not call upon us to trace the details of natural conformity in connection with the Tenth Plague. Something of this kind might perhaps be made out, but we shall not now attempt to make it out. Not only in connection with the Tenth, but with every one of the Ten, there is something, and there is much, mysterious and inscrutable, outrunning the stretch and reach of natural law. What we are concerned to show is, that the outrunning is *in the line of law, and not against law*, that God in miracles does not antagonize, but supplements, God in Nature.

The Tenth Plague, therefore, we not only admit, but hasten and are glad to admit, transcends more completely than any of the rest, the ordinary sweep of law, but yet the same natural propriety and dignity of method can be observed in this miracle as in all the others.

But we see from this examination of the narrative, how far reason can go up towards the mystery of miracle. We have two series of plagues, one of six plagues, another of three. The first series has to do with the water, and the result of its impurity. The second series

has do with the air, and the results of its disturbance by storm. But the water and the air are the two uniform facts of Egypt, more uniform than in any other land on earth. These are each in turn moved by direct, divine intervention into unusual and retributive energy. Out of the turbid and bloody waters of the first plague came five plagues more, just as according to natural law they must come. Out of the whirling and darkened air of the seventh plague came two plagues more, just as according to natural law they might come. The tenth and last plague wraps around itself the lonely and awful mystery in which death always clothes and conceals his power.

Now look at all this narrative! What could be at once more natural in its method, and yet supernatural in its genesis, degree, and effect, on the one hand to terrify and subdue the tyrant Egyptians, and on the other to invigorate and inspire the crushed and timid slaves? The "light in their dwellings" was a fire in their souls. Such events, if any, would make them freemen indeed, not amusing them by the fanciful prodigies of some demigod who possessed a certain power over nature, but awing them into a reverent and thrilling confidence in that One and the same Supreme Being, who worked evermore in nature, and yet could make nature herself tower into a supernatural majesty of deliverance and destruction.

May we not then come back with a more justified confidence and a freshened faith to the question with which we started? Does God in miracle oppose God in nature? We may answer, No. No real miracle drives us upon such an alternative. We come into a deeper and truer understanding of what a true miracle is, that it is the special active *coincidence of God in nature* and *God above nature*, that it discloses the highest forms of both Energies operating in the same phenomena. All real miracles are thus in a sense natural and reasonable and also supernatural. Only false miracles seem far-fetched and fantastic. We see that those sublime and terrible events, which quarried the Jewish nation out of the Egyptian sand, were arranged on a plan of natural propriety and justice. Miraculous power is present and evident at every step. But its stroke is not contradictory to natural law, does not dispense with it, does not suspend it, but never uses it, and supplements it, so far as there is need.

Here, then, is the death-blow to spiritual pretense, jugglery and quackery. A true miracle will honor God in nature so far as nature goes. Thus while the evidence for the merely marvelous recedes, under the sifting of science, the evidence for the truly miraculous advances. Upon intelligent minds the marvelous is not the impressive. It is discredited. Upon the mind of such an age as our own, the power of an alleged miracle is not in the ratio of its marvelousness, but it is in the ratio of the coincidence which it illustrates between forces nobly natural, and Another Force going along with them, which transcends

Nature. The Egyptian Miracles stand higher under this analysis of them as Testimonies of God. They more sublimely vindicate themselves as genuine Miracles of the Most High.

As reasonable and yet believing men we hug the shore of God's eternal and natural law; then from thence let our faith fly out over the deep. God is always in harmony with Himself, and His occasional great light-house of Miracle, with its far-flashing light, soars up only from and upon the granite ledges of His Laws.

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